

Press Club October 10, 2002



Opening Statement, Press Club

10/10/02

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for coming today.

The period since our last Press Club has been remarkably calm, reflecting the desire of the people of Kosovo to live in peace. This peace permits citizens to focus on the important issues that affect their day-to-day lives. Issues like jobs, economic development, education, and law and order have been discussed in the news lately and I see this as a sign of hope for those with a stake in Kosovo's future. It's a positive sign because perhaps Kosovo is ready to turn away from its past of ethnic strife and focus on issues that challenge any functioning democratic society. It is the job of elected political leaders to address these issues. While KFOR continues to provide area security, the solutions to these challenges lie with the people of Kosovo and their elected leaders.

So as the security situation remains calm, it is appropriate that in just over two weeks the Kosovo people will be offered an opportunity to choose the leadership they think can best address the issues that affect their communities. As I have explained before, these municipal elections are a key milestone for Kosovo and the people of the world are watching your progress. I ask all of you to encourage your readers, viewers and listeners to vote in the upcoming election. Elections are the single most important democratic process and this election will determine the leadership that will be in place during a critical time in Kosovo's history. Today my most important message to you is this: it is every citizen's duty to vote on October 26th.

Finally, there have been reports in the media about the withdrawal of American troops from Kosovo. I can assure you that there are no plans for an American troop withdrawal. As you know, we are rotating many of our troops in November, when other soldiers from

the Big Red One Division will replace us. Planning is already ongoing for the units that will replace them next May. America remains committed to the people of Kosovo and stability in the Balkans.

Thank you.

I'm ready for your questions and today I think we start over here.

Driton Ramadani, Radio Ferizaj and RTK: "These days they are discussing Steiner's plan in Mitrovica. In Mitrovica you have part of your staff. What are you going to do for this plan and to implement it for success?"

Brigadier General Lute: "Actually there are no American soldiers in Mitrovica. About a month we had a company, about 100 soldiers, who worked there for one month, under the French brigade. As you know this troop rotation is part of normal plan where brigades take turns assisting the French in Mitrovica but American turn is now complete. Let me address the substance of your question that addresses that has do with Steiner's '7 Step' Plan. The pillars of the international community are all in support of Mr. Steiner's plan. – this includes NATO, KFOR and the United States. Personally what I can say is that I think any plan that holds hope and promise to create in Mitrovica a situation that will create normal, typical European city, is a plan we should all support. Thank you."

Përparim Isufi, Newspaper Zeri: "Mr. General how do you comment on your leaving your experience in Kosovo, then the European Union will take your place, and then the command under the Greeks."

BG Lute: "This idea is news to me. I can assure that NATO and that inside NATO, the United States remain committed to the Kosovo mission. And I know of no plans for an E.U. organization to replace NATO. I'm afraid you'll be coming to Bondsteel for press clubs for many months."

Nazim Haliti, Newspaper Koha Ditore: "How far did you go with the investigation with the Algerian detainees and how far did you go with the joint investigation?"

BG Lute: "Again you're trying to get two questions out of one. Let me take the first, and someone else may ask about Klokot. But – nice try. As you know we detained for some period a number of Algerian citizens who work for non-governmental organizations in this area. These individuals were detained not because they are Algerian and not because they are affiliated with any group. They were detained simply because they were observed conducting surveillance of American facilities. We detained for a period that gave us sufficient time to determine who they are, where they work and what they were doing. And when we became satisfied that they meant us no harm, they were released and I can tell you now they've all been released. Thank you."

Bekim Kupina, Newspaper Koha Ditore and Radio Tema: "You stressed the importance of the municipal elections. And we think that the people are not interested in the participation of this election. Many people think that they have to do with the final status of Kosovo. How true is this that the elections can determine the future of Kosovo?"

BG Lute: “ Mr. Steiner has a very thoughtful statement. Mr. Steiner says: ‘First standards, then status.’ Of course what he means by this is that before we can discuss the final status of Kosovo, we must first show progress against standards – standards like inter-ethnic cooperation and tolerance, standards like law and order, and standards like the return of refugees and IDP’s. I see the upcoming municipal elections as elections that have to do with standards not status. It is the progress against those standards that the international community is watching carefully. And that’s why those elections are so important.”

Jelena Popovic, TV Herc: “Sir General, what significant can we expect in regards to the Serb after they participate in the elections?”

BG Lute: “That depends on the results of the elections and the leaders that are elected in each municipality. Whatever the outcome of the elections, what you can expect from KFOR is a continued commitment to provide security throughout Kosovo. Along with our international partners --UNMIK, the civilian police and so forth -- you can expect continued assistance towards the people of Kosovo giving them the opportunity to move forward. Thank you.”

Habit Selah, Radio Star: “Mr. General about the elections in Serbia and as you know the extremists got more votes there and who do you the Kosovo Serbs will vote for?”

BG Lute: “As a soldier I’m not in the position to forecast election results or promote particular voting patterns. What’s important to me that every citizen in this region here feels safe and secure in his road to the ballot box. The beautiful thing about elections is that the outcome is in the hands of the people. And whoever wins in each of the seven municipalities in my area, you can be sure that KFOR will stand ready the day after the elections to form partnerships to those newly elected officials as we work together for future progress. Who those future partners are, depends on the people. We’ll be here either way. Thank you”

Muhamet Halili, Radio Gjilan “Mr. General you told us that there is no troop withdrawal from here. What type of influence will the municipal elections have and also the elections around Kosovo?”

BG Lute: “There is no direct linkage between the outcome of the elections and KFOR strength. As in any military operations, the strength of KFOR, and how we conduct our mission here is dictated to the situation on the ground. So ... for example, last year KFOR totaled 32,000 troops; today KFOR has 30,000 troops. Likewise, the American troop strength inside KFOR has decreased over the last year. I think we will continue to see this logical sequence of reductions. Of course, the reductions reflect the security of the environment. As you see improvements in the security situation and we see our partners in the KPS become more proficient, we’ll see the strength of KFOR and the role of KFOR become less. This very natural process of associating to the troops available to the troops on the ground and it has nothing to do with the elections. We do not expect the outcome of the elections to change the security of the environment. Thank you.

Valdete Daut, TV Festina: “KFOR Commander Fabio Mini committed he is going to fight organized crime. How much expressed organized crime is there in your zone.”

BG Lute: First of all I should welcome publicly LG Mini to his new position as Commander of KFOR. Just yesterday he visited Bondsteel and his first visit as COMKFOR. General Mini has been outspoken in regards to KFOR's support role in the fight against organized crime. I emphasize a role in support of law enforcement agencies. There's an old saying in the United States Army -- 'The Army is a great hammer, but not every problem is a nail.' So while KFOR remains in a position and ready to support the fight against organized crime, which is lead by Civpol and KPS; we are not ideally suited to conduct that fight by ourselves. Thank you.

Ibrahim Sefedini, RTV Illria: "My colleague's question went unanswered about Klokot."

BG Lute: "See, I told you someone else would ask. The Klokot investigation continues. As we announced here, several weeks ago, we have joined a joint investigation task force. This task force brings together investigators from Civpol, KPS and KFOR. We have conducted over 120 interviews. And several searches based on warrants. While I'm very pleased with the progress, the crime has not been solved. One of the rules that we have in this brigade has to do with patience. The rule says "We must have patience, do not rush to failure." So very week when I get progress reports on the investigation, I remind myself of this rule. I would remind all of your listener's and readers that the 2,500 Euro reward remains in effect. We are looking to concerned citizens to set forward. In democracies around the world today, this is how crimes are solved. Thank you."

Gëzim Kokollari, Radio Furtuna: "The municipal elections are close and can you tell us how the cooperation with the previous municipality leaders of Ferizaj?"

BG Lute: "Of course, you must understand that as a soldier I'm in no position to endorse one party over another. As I mentioned earlier in a previous question, whoever the people select as their municipal leaders will be our partners. KFOR is only waiting for the people to choice. Thank you."

Kokollari: "I want to know if you have jointly realized any program with them?"

BG Lute: "Our progress today with all municipality leaders is satisfactory. Whoever leads a municipality in this region will have a partner in KFOR."

Demush Zefi, Newspaper Bota Sot "In your opening statement you quoted Mr. Steiner three options. Because KFOR is the main factor here, how much do you contribute to those three factors? How much will those be fulfilled after Nov.1st?"

BG Lute: "By factors in my opening statement are you referring to jobs, education, and law and order?"

Zefi: "And the return of Refuges."

BG Lute: "These are important issues for the progress of Kosovo. In order for progress to take place in each of these areas, KFOR has an important role. If we just isolate one of those – returns; it is clear that if individuals do not feel secure and their returns will not be sustainable as Mr. Steiner has called for unless KFOR can provide overall security. I can assure you that KFOR and the rest of the international community are looking for

increased progress on returns. There is no more a clear signal that Kosovo is prepared to move forward then supporting returns. Like the rest of these issues, KFOR cannot solve the return issue. For none of these issues is there a military solution. The solution lies with the people of Kosovo and the desire of the people will be from the leaders they elect. This is why I say that the elections are an important sign to the international community. The people of the world want to know where the people of Kosovo are headed. Are the people of Kosovo headed forward or backwards? The election will help us understand this answer.”

Zefi: “Can I ask one more question?”

BG Lute: “We’re moving fast today, so yes.”

Zefi: “Are the standards are fulfilled to start the procedure for the independence of Kosovo?”

BG Lute: “I never should have allowed this question. (joking) I knew it was a mistake. Before we can discuss status, and authorities far beyond Camp Bondsteel decide on this issue, we must first attain the standards required. Mr. Steiner has laid out these standards. Among these standards is increased tolerance for all citizens of Kosovo, reflected largely by tolerance for returns. We have not met yet standards on a number of issues, like returns, it is premature to talk about status. Ultimately that is a better question for Mr. Steiner than it is General Lute.”

Zefi: “I hope I didn’t put you in an awkward position.”

Lute: “You are all my guests. I treat you as my guests. I consider your questions to be honest questions, and my answers to be honest answers.”

Lute to reporter: “Did he take your question?”

Shyqeri Halabaku, Radio Zeri I Pozerhanit: “I think no one left anything for me.”

BG Lute: “There is no requirement to ask a question.”

Halabaku: “Mr. General, we do not have to deal with security situation. Kosovo is faced many problems -- teacher’s strike, unemployment. Can KFOR grant the foreign investments so we can get out these struggles/problems?”

BG Lute: “KFOR cannot guarantee anything in Kosovo except a safe and secure environment. I am not a corporate investor. If I were, I believe that one thing I would look for is a safe and secure environment before I invested my money. That’s just the first thing I would do. I would also look for infrastructure, a labor force, laws and regulations, and so forth. As important as investment to Kosovo, KFOR can only provide the security environment. We must rely on progress from other areas, from the International community and from the people of Kosovo themselves. I agree with you that the long-term solution in Kosovo must favor economic development. This is part of the reason why I say that the elections are so important and the rest of the world is watching. Potential investors want to know if Kosovo is a good place to invest. They will

judge the people by the leaders that the people select. No one should be mistaken. These elections are vitally important. The international community will draw conclusions, including international investors. These conclusions will be either positive or negative. The conclusions drawn will have an important impact on the future of Kosovo. In this way, each ballot counts. I emphasize to you that in democracies such as ours, in America, we feel it is their duty – I mean duty in the military sense – duty to vote.

Thank you for your questions today.

Mark, do we have the dates for the next press club? ... Well it will be the middle of November. It will be a happy day for me because I will have my replacement sitting next to me. You'll have the opportunity to meet a few more American soldiers. Remember there are many more where we came from. Thank you."